

**THE CAMBRIDGE COMPANION TO CLASSICAL ISLAMIC THEOLOGY.** Edited by Tim Winter. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008. Pp.xi+337. ISBN: 978-0-521-78549-5 (PP).

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Introduced by distinguished divinity lecturer and Ghazali translator Tim Winter, this volume consists in fifteen chapters averaging 20 pages each, written by US and UK academicians in two parts: "Historical Perspectives" with five chapters – "Qur'an and Hadith" by Qur'an translator M.A.S. Abdel Haleem; "The early creed" by historian Khalid Blankinship; "Islamic philosophy (*falsafa*)" by *ishraq* scholar Hossein Ziai; "The developed *kalam* tradition" by historians of philosophy Oliver Leaman and Sajjad Rizvi; "The social construction of orthodoxy" by law historian Ahmed El Shamsy; and "Themes" with ten chapters – "God: essence and attributes" by intellectual historian Nader El-Bizri; "Creation" by Thomist comparatist and Ghazali translator David B. Burrell CSC (Congregation of the Holy Cross, a Catholic order); "Ethics" by philosopher Steffen A.J. Stelzer; "Revelation" by Taymiyyan Yahya Michot; "The existence of God" by Razi specialist Ayman Shihadeh; "Worship" by Sufi translator William Chittick; "Theological dimensions of Islamic law" – the most pointed of the collection – by religious historian and comparatist Umar F. Abd-Allah; "Theology and Sufism" by esotericist Toby Mayer; "Epistemology and divine discourse" by philosopher Paul-A. Hardy; and "Eschatology" by sociologist Marcia Hermansen.

This is a book for those who do not regard expressions such as "Islamic *tawhid*" (Burrell p. 141) as tautologies and are not afraid to compare Plato and Socrates to the Prophet Muhammad (Stelzer p. 177) or read that "his psyche perfectly transposes the divine message into the speech most appropriate for his human audience" (Michot p. 186). Its mostly transparent style makes it a reader-friendly volume faithful to the Cambridge series' promise to "provide an accessible and stimulating introduction to the subject for new readers and non-specialists." But old readers and specialists, or at least those looking for material from the perspective of "classical Islam" itself, will be disappointed by its over-reliance on secondary sources, over-exposure of speculative sufism and philosophies at the expense of basic mainstream doctrine and exegesis, indulgence of sweeping, ill-referenced generalizations and other Goldziherian gaps and Massignonic inaccuracies.

As a whole, the classical understanding of Prophetology, scripturology, angelology and the doctrine of *qadar* is absent from this book. One article, after correctly defining "Qur'an and Hadith" as the two "form[s] of revealed scripture" (Abdel Haleem p. 22), lists the "Scriptural Dogmas" or Islamic theology's "five basic components: belief in one God, His messengers, His books, His angels, and the day of judgment," leaving out the sixth Pillar of faith, belief in foreordained destiny or *qadar*. Another article presents orthodoxy as a social construct that developed from the ground up, not from the Lawgiver down. "Claims to truth *came to be enshrined in social practices, such as rituals*.... ordinary believers were not passive recipients of ideals of orthodoxy proffered by scholars and rulers: they were *actively engaged in evaluating, propagating and forging* beliefs and rituals that contributed substantially to the construction of orthodoxy in any given time or place" (El Shamsy p. 97, my emphasis).

*Against the Logicians* is predictably branded as illustrative of "the fundamentalist reaction" (Ziai p. 69) and Ibn Taymiyya as anti-reason, anti-logic and anti-*kalam* (Leaman p. 83), but many major non-Hanbalis and Ash'aris such as al-Ash'ari himself, al-Khattabi, al-Shahrastani, al-Nawawi and Ibn al-Salah (if not all Sunni schools on the whole) were anti-philosophy well before Ibn Taymiyya. The latter may have been "always a marginal figure and the Ash'arite school... far more acceptable to the ulema" before Wahhabism (p. 84) and his work "a prime example of sophistry, distorting the philosophers' views to serve his own anti-rationalist ideology" (Ziai p. 76); nevertheless, the authors are too quick to assume a monolithic Ash'arism and also leave unaddressed (as the collection does as a whole) the fact that it is taking a back seat in the Sunni world today. Perhaps among the reasons for this is the boggling simplism of Ibn Taymiyya's linguistics, in whose view "divine discourse is linked with human language by a world of shared human experience which underlies both" (Hardy p. 297).

The contributors seem preoccupied with Aristotelians and the Ash'ari-philosophical nexus, or *Mishkat al-Anwar*, Ibn 'Arabi and Hallaj more than with classical Islamic theology proper. The *falasifa* are even extolled as "classical Muslim thinkers developing a philosophical model for the reception of revelation" alongside their reductionism that "prophethood was seen as consisting, in theory, of powers accessible to everybody" (Michot p. 194). Ziai reviews the issues central to Muslim concerns in the wake of Arabic

translation of Greek texts on which the philosophical tradition in Islam, he says, was almost entirely based. (He mentions “Ash‘ari, whose work *The Treatise (al-Risala)* is still studied in Sunni institutions” (p. 67) although Sunni institutions in the capital of Ash‘arism today, Damascus, show no knowledge of it.) Leaman, eager to debunk the Goldziherism of Ghazali as the slayer of philosophy on behalf of theology and Sufism, reconstructs him as a bona fide philosopher and, along his teacher Ibn al-Juwayni’s lines, the logic-bound producer of “a systematic theology which progressed on strictly ratiocinative lines” (p. 77-78). Key *kalam* concepts are traced back to *falsafa*, such as “the logical construction of the ‘Necessary Being’... described by Avicenna for the first time in history” as well as the purported acquirability of Prophethood forwarded by al-Farabi (Ziai p. 64-65), Averroes (Leaman p. 80) and Avicenna (Michot p. 192-194). Of particular interest is the synopsis of the weaknesses of Mu‘tazilism (El-Bizri p. 123-124), the common points between it and Avicenna’s ontology (p. 132-134), and the “historical integration of philosophy into theological reflections on the essence-attribute problem” by al-Fakhr al-Razi and his successors (p. 135-136). The volume thoroughly defines and redefines Ash‘ari atomism (Mayer p. 273 especially).

Abd-Allah’s “Theological dimensions” is refreshing and filled with gems on the centrality of law (p. 237, 245), the untold truth that religious authority and the state have been separate for over 1,000 years in Islam (p. 239) and the dual centrality of Ibn al-Baqillani in *kalam* and legal theory (p. 247). He also debunks the West’s anti-rational image of Ash‘arism as “rooted primarily in a confusion of legal rationality with the rationalism of speculative theology” (p. 249) and offers a luminous page on the innateness of belief (p. 251). His leitmotiv that “the law is essential to the perfection of divine servitude [and] as such... fundamental to Sufism” (p. 251) is a beautiful answer to Chittick’s dilution, in the article “Worship,” of “the moral imperative” (i.e. ethics and law) into a sublime universalism in the name of “the ontological imperative.” Similarly, one will look in vain, in Toby Mayer’s “Theology and Sufism,” for the pure, action-bound *tawhid* of the *Hikam* manuals of a Rifa‘i or a Shadhili but will regrettably find that “God, not ‘atoms,’ is the real ground of the cosmos” (p. 274) and that “God’s likeness, according to Ibn ‘Arabi, is the Perfect Man, that linchpin of late Sufi cosmology” (p. 283) – once more to the fringes.

Despite being flagged by Mustafa Azami years ago, the profusion of hadith chains still gets mistaken for the incidence of the texts themselves: one contributor numbers the latter at “perhaps a million separate reports” (Abdel Haleem p. 23), another “in the hundreds of thousands” (El Shamsy p. 98), whereas their totality barely reaches fifty thousand. Al-Hasan al-Basri’s supposed epistle to the caliph ‘Abd al-Malik (Blankinship p. 39) is in fact a forgery quoted by late Mu‘tazili, Zaydi and Twelver-Shi‘i authors and surviving only in three very late manuscripts; equally dubious is the Orientalist axiom of al-Hasan’s Qadarism (p. 39) / Mu‘tazilism (Mayer p. 260). Hisham ibn al-Hakam is said to have “rejected extreme anthropomorphism” (Blankinship p. 41) but the sources from Ibn Qutayba to al-Dhahabi describe him as its very archetype. “The Mu‘tazilite polemic... led some Sunnis to state that the mortal sinner is not a believer while he is committing the act, but afterwards returns to believing status” (p. 50) but this is stated in a hadith no less. And why switch back and forth between Orientalist suffixes (-ite, -id) and literate ones (-i, -a)? Abu al-Layth al-Samarqandi’s *Sharh al-Fiqh al-Akbar* is misattributed to al-Maturidi (El-Bizri p. 138), and the *Risala ila Ahl al-Thaghr* is most probably by Ibn Mujahid and not, as attributed, his teacher al-Ash‘ari (p. 129). What “many... authorities within the Hanafite rite... had defined themselves in terms of membership of Ibn Karram’s [corporealism] school” (Mayer p. 264)? Even less were ultra-Sunnis such as Abu Yazid al-Bistami, Abu Hafis al-Haddadi and his student Hamdun al-Qassar esotericists (p. 260) or Mu‘tazila (p. 261)!

I appreciated the thoughtful translations of *Shari‘a* (Winter p. 3), jurisprudential instruments (Abd-Allah p. 246) and legal professions (p. 254); *wahdat al-wujud* and *wahdat al-shuhud* (Mayer p. 275) but was puzzled by the translation of Q 75:17-18 as “It rests upon Us to assemble it and to produce it; and when We produce it, follow its production” (Michot p. 183). *Al-Maqсад al-Asna* is not “The Highest Aim” (Hardy p. 299) – for that would be *al-Asma* – but “The Purest.”